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ABSTRACT

For instructors in college writing centers, doing research is crucial, both for understanding what they do and authorizing who they are. A dialogic relationship between the research undertaken and current theory is particularly crucial. The goal of this research needs to be understanding the relationship between the writing center and the larger institution. One way to do this is by focusing research on the stories of their day-to-day lives in writing centers. The most recent wave of research, written since Steve North's call for research in his "Idea of a Writing Center," has been of a highly theoretical sort and consequently has initiated a backlash: writing center instructors are calling for an end to research, a break from the theoretical cacophony. But Nancy Chodorow's theory about men's and women's work in "The Reproduction of Mothering" would offer a word of caution in the face of this retreat. Madeleine Grumet's reading of Chodorow posits a two-tiered institutional system in which men are responsible for systems, policy, procedures, and curriculum, and women are responsible for maintenance and execution. Writing instructors must guard against relegating themselves to this "lower class" position. They must speak about their daily lives behind the closed doors of writing centers and comment on their place in the larger institution. (TB)

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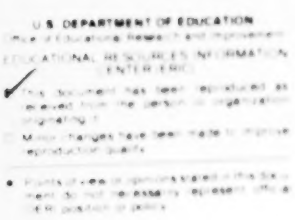
"Backlash"

OR

The Dialogic Interanimation between Theory and Research in the Writing Center

Meg Woolbright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In 1984, in the now legendary "Idea of a Writing Center" Steve North called "research--ideally legitimizing research" the only possible response not only to the widely misunderstood nature of writing centers but to their very existence. The goal of such research should be, North says, "to refine our understanding," to theorize, if you will, about the nature of writing center interactions. Now surely, in the last ten years, we've come a long way in this regard: there has been a good deal of wonderfully complex and highly theoretical research done by writing center scholars--all of which has made a substantial contribution to what we know about interactions in writing centers.

But--I wonder. When I hear stories from college writing center directors about the number of hours spent documenting tutoring sessions to keep teachers informed of what we're doing, or compiling statistics on the numbers of happy clients served--or when I hear from high school writing center directors stories of "correcting" papers for teachers, or conducting workshops so teachers can attend professional development seminars, I wonder how

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this research has helped to clarify the "widely misunderstood nature" of writing centers. I wonder how it has "authorized" our existence. Mostly I wonder what this research has to do with what we do day to day. Maybe in some sense what we know has changed, but by and large where we are has not.

In the scenario I'm depicting what's alarming to me is not really that we haven't moved very far--although that's alarming enough--but that recently, writing center commentators have been constructing arguments that signal a movement away from the crucial role that theoretical research (of the right sort) can play in both understanding and authorizing writing centers. The fact that this movement comes at a time when writing centers are increasingly being viewed as sites of institutional change, concerns me. I want to address this conservative movement and then suggest what I think is the right sort of legitimizing research.

Last year at this conference, a number of writing center commentators spoke against the usefulness of both theory and research. In the week following the conference, WCenter was literally abuzz with a call for less theory about writing centers in Nashville. One person said, "All this theory makes me cranky!" For these people, the argument goes something like this, "We're a practical bunch. We're too busy to bother with all this theory. Besides, it's too complicated anyway." Perhaps the most extreme example was the person who spoke to us in San Diego using a fabricated transcript, saying, "They're all alike anyway, right?"

The difficulty I have with this atheoretical stance is that it not only doesn't help us to understand writing center interactions, more importantly, it doesn't help us to understand the relationship between writing centers and the larger institution. The solution is not to stop doing theoretical research, but to redefine it.

Let me be clear about my assumptions: For those of us in writing centers, doing research is crucial--both for understanding what we do and authorizing who we are. It is particularly crucial that there is a dialogic relationship between the research we undertake and current theory. The goal of this research needs to be understanding the relationship between the writing center and the larger institution. One way to do this is by focusing our research on the stories of our day to day lives in writing centers.

I want to talk briefly about these assumptions in light of feminist theory.

In The Reproduction of Mothering, Nancy Chodorow makes the distinction between men's work and women's work. For her, men's work is "organized around a defined progression toward a finite product." What this means for Madeleine Grumet is that the work of men is the work of systems, of policy, of procedure, of curriculum. Within our society's construction of gender roles, the work of women, for both Chodorow and Grumet, is maintenance work, "repeated to sustain life," to sustain systems not to change them.

I've chosen this dichotomy because it seems to me that this distinction between men's work and women's work is the distinction between theory and practice, between the institutionalized work of the academy and the maintenance work of the writing center. Theory is public and publicly authorized work. It is an interpretive and speculative enterprise carried out as the traditional work of a system. It is the window that frames and defines the ideologies in which we work. The work of women, on the other hand, is practice, focusing on people, their stories and their lives. Far from the public eye, this work takes place behind closed doors. According to the way we are constructed in most institutions, writing center work is women's work. It is hidden and it is silent.

Conservative arguments against theoretical research are very much a part of the systematic construction of writing centers as "supplement" to and "support" of the authorized work of the curriculum and the intellectual life of the academy. When we, as writing center scholars, argue against theory, we are buying into this construction and validating this "lower class" position. We are saying that all we do is the women's work of maintenance: simple custodial work, requiring no thought, no reflection. We are busy, practical people, busily practicing the policy that others set.

More than anything else, our research needs to tell these stories, these stories of our day to day lives, these stories that show so clearly what our relationship is to the larger institution.

These stories will redefine not only what we know but who we are--and they will go a long way toward giving a public voice to the private lives we lead behind writing center doors.